

# Gender Based Violence against Women During COVID-19 Lockdown: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

Earlier studies have shown that incidents of gender based violence (GBV) against women have increased in the face of the pandemic. GBV is an all pervasive issue. In India, crime against women is a serious issue. Many ranking agencies have declared India as the most dangerous country for women due to the prevalence of GBV. The aim of this research was to investigate incidents of GBV when lockdown was declared during COVID-19 pandemic in India. This study identified the factors involved in GBV against women during COVID-19 through thematic analysis. For this study incidents of GBV were taken from different parts of India during lockdown. The result shows that the lockdown situation had reinforced instances of GBV against females. It also shows that males were carrying out these crimes during lockdown due to having no fear of being caught, unemployment, stress and boredom. Frustration could have been a major reason leading to gender based crimes. Another significant reason that resulted in gender based crimes during lockdown period during the pandemic was migration.

**Keywords:** Lockdown; Gender Based Violence; COVID -19; Women; India.

## INTRODUCTION

The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in India on January, 2020, when three Indian medical students of Kerala returned to their towns

from Wuhan (WHO 2020). The cases engulfed other regions in the country and soon spread to different states of the country (Kumari & Tohniwal, 2020). It was on 11 March 2020 that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a "global pandemic." With the increasing number (crossed 500) of COVID-19 cases in India, the Prime Minister of the country Mr. Narendra Modi has declared a fourteen hour public curfew on 22 March 2020. This was done to control the spread of corona virus. Following public curfew, the government of India (GIO) ordered a complete lockdown across the country for twenty one days, starting from the midnight of 24 March 2020 (Soni, 2021). To control the worsening situation of COVID-19 pandemic in the country social gatherings were banned and cinema halls, schools, restaurants, offices, shopping complexes, educational institutions were all shut.

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People were asked to stay indoors as much as possible. Streets were deserted and road were empty as everyone, except those associated with essential services, were asked to stay indoors during the lockdown (Gautam 2020). Social distancing had become a new norm of living (De Vos, 2020).

Social distancing has helped in controlling the spread of COVID-19 virus for some extent, but it brought negative impact on the life of females (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Living a more domestic life and lack of contact with the outside world made women more prone to GBV. However, women have been subjected to violence in both private and public spheres, (Russo & Pirlott, 2006).

The latest edition of the Global Study on Homicide (published by UNODC) published in 2019, states that the home of a female is the most dangerous place for her. In a very short span of time, the situation caused by the pandemic began to put a tremendous pressure on the economy of various countries. From how we function in a society to how we interact with our landscape to how we live as people; every aspect of our life was altered during the pandemic time. This new way of life was challenging because it was affecting almost every part of our life. And the lockdown measures introduced to restrict the spread of COVID-19 have in fact aggravated GBV against women in a form of sexual violence and domestic violence. Therefore, the aim of this research study is to investigate GBV that happened during the lockdown period in India and to identify factors involved in GBV against women during lockdown by thematic analysis.

### *GBV during Pandemic*

COVID-19 brought the term 'Quarantine' once again in the life of common people as it is an effective measure of controlling contagious diseases since 532 AD (Schepin, 1991). The literature shows that in 1377AD the concept of 'Quarantine' was deeply rooted in the health practice to control the spread of plague (Gensini et al., 2004). The land travelers were isolated for forty days, and ships were put in isolation for thirty days in the seaport of Ragusa (Nie, 2015).

Once COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic by WHO, there was tremendous pressure on the Indian government to come up with strategies that could prevent community spread. There were no vaccinations available at that point in time that could provide immunity to people against coronavirus. Hence, social distancing as a tool was employed to prevent spread of coronavirus within

various regions. Those testing positive for the virus were put under strict quarantine period and were constantly monitored by health officials. People had to embrace a new norm of living during the pandemic. This caused a drastic change in the lifestyle of individuals. One cannot negate the fact that social distancing did help in curbing down infection and preventing spread of the disease to a huge extent, it is important to acknowledge that the pandemic period also led to severe social isolation among people. Many people lost their jobs and had to face economic vulnerability, along with mental health issues resulting from quarantine, uncertainty and loneliness. When it comes to GBV, there is considerable similarity between the recent global pandemic caused from coronavirus and a lot of other pandemics in history. The lockdown granted greater freedom to abusers (Bradbury Jones & Isham, 2020) Several literatures show that there has been an increase in cases of GBV in several nations. According to Wagers (2020) different states of United States also reported an increase of about 21-35% in GBV. A 5% increase in GBV has been observed in Australia (Gearin & Knight, 2020). There was a three-fold increase in GBV in China in the year of 2020 (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020) during lockdown. In India, there has been a visible increase in the number of GBV (Ingala & Smith, 2020). In the year 2020, National Commission of Women of India received a total of 23,722 complaints on GBV out of which 1,699 cases were registered between April and June, 2020 (Jain, 2020). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that GBV is predominantly directed towards females. GBV includes sexual violence. Any form of violence towards women such as domestic violence, sexual assault, molestation as well as female genital mutilation which are practiced within many communities come under GBV. For the present paper, the term GBV has been used for two kinds of violence against women such as sexual violence and domestic violence (Khosla et al., 2017).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

For this research study the sample was drawn by searching the terms 'gender based violence, COVID-19, rape, domestic, sexual violence, lockdown' in open sources. Articles depicting the incidents happened in India and published during the lockdown period (25 March 2020 to 31 May 2020) have been taken into consideration for this study. Initial online search threw up a total of 303

articles in different media outlets such as, local newspapers from various parts of the country, national newspapers, websites and e-magazines. After reading 303 articles total 31 articles have been filtered which were relevant for this study. Other 272 articles were not narrating any incident of GBV. A thematic analysis has been done to identify the factors involved in GBV against women during COVID-19.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis approach has been adopted to analyze the data in this research study. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), this approach is useful in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The data were analyzed in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. In compiling the articles and news reports were prepared and organized to extract meaning. Later, a disassembled process was performed by segregating data and putting it in groups to give meaning to data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). After disassembling the data in meaningful groups, the research reassembled the data and started interpretation.

At the first stage of research the researcher read and re-read articles and news reports in order to identify potential themes, which she then forwarded to the co researcher. The coding was done by two independent researchers, during the analysis process the researcher reviewed the articles and news reports several times. Later the

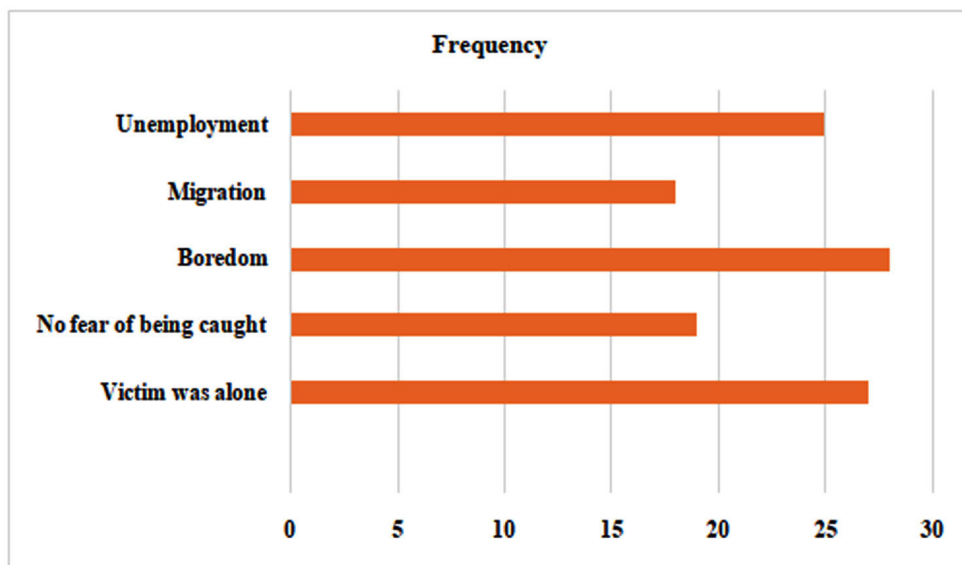
Krippendorff's alpha has been calculated (See table 1) for each theme to check the reliability (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). After the finalization of themes, the write-up of the report began.

## RESULT

The researchers identified eleven overarching themes. However, after calculating Krippendorff's alpha of themes, 6 themes were excluded from the study because their Krippendorff's alpha value ( $< .7$ ) were not satisfactory. Finally, the researchers took 5 themes which's Krippendorff's alpha is greater than  $.7$  (See Table 1) into consideration. Fig. 1 illustrates the frequency of words comes under above mentioned themes. Those where victim was alone, no fear of being caught, boredom, migration, unemployment.

**Table 1:** Inter-rater reliability for themes

| Measure                 | Krippendorff's alpha |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Victim was alone        | .71                  |
| Night                   | .61                  |
| No fear of being caught | .92                  |
| Boredom                 | .89                  |
| Migration               | .73                  |
| Unemployment            | .91                  |
| Stress                  | .70                  |
| Alcoholism              | .37                  |
| Proximity               | .53                  |
| Forced isolation        | .35                  |
| <b>Anxiety</b>          | <b>.63</b>           |



**Fig. 1:** Themes used in articles.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Victim was alone*

It is important to realize that gender violence, particularly rape, as a crime is intimate in nature.

And conviction rate is quite low when it comes to punishing the guilty involved in committing such crimes against women such as rape. Often, such cases when they go to court are laden with “the burden of proof” resulting in impunity for crimes against women.

In addition to this there is the problem of victimization and a sense of shame attached to gender crimes. This further dissuades women from reporting such incidents and at the same time emboldens perpetrators to carry on with their heinous acts such as, rape, sexual assault, molestation, domestic violence or anything else that violated the dignity of women. Moreover, it becomes easy for a criminal to exploit a woman they intend to violate if she is alone or travelling alone or if she is in an isolated area. In such circumstances the vulnerability quotient increases manifold because the perpetrators think that they can get away after committing the crime. For a criminal, paucity of evidence or absence of witness serve as important factors when they consider committing crime against women.

Out of a total of 31 articles, 21 articles or news reports dealt with incidents of domestic violence while the rest 20 cases reported incidents of sexual violence. Among 20 cases, only one case had the presence of family member where the victim was not alone (it happened in the presence of victim’s brother) while in the rest 19 cases the perpetrators committed the crime when the victim was alone. For example a 21-year-old woman was raped near the bank of the Yamuna River. In another incident, a girl aged 14 was gangraped in a forest and a 16-year-old girl was gangraped near a nonworking dam (Elsa, 2020). In another case, a woman aged 40 was raped inside a school when she was all alone. There are reason why perpetrators target women in isolated areas. According to Costopoulos & Juni (2018) a perpetrator seeks pleasure by dominating the victims and achieves extreme happiness by witnessing submission along with humiliation and degradation of the victim (Illescas, 2002). Thus, the perpetrator could easily dominate the victim when she is alone.

In domestic violence cases also, we see that females are targeted at home. During lockdown,

women’s presence at home had increased manifold compelling them to stay indoors and subjecting them to domestic violence more often as they were not in a position to seek other safe havens to escape from the violence. Neither they could seek help from others. Hence the pandemic aggravated their already dire situation to a great extent.

### *No fear of being caught*

Previously, a series of studies have shown that most males are inclined towards raping females (Boylon, 2019). When Malamuth (1981) conducted a survey and a focus group study on this issue, many male respondents of the survey accepted that they would rape women and girls to fulfil their sexual desire. It is the fear of punishment that dissuades them from raping women. Lockdown had diluted these factors to a certain extent, making the situation ripe for such crimes to take place.

Lack of getting caught or no fear of punishment encouraged criminals to commit such crimes. Often perpetrators of rape crimes are minors. This goes to show that males who do not have female partners have more tendency to commit such (Shukla & David, 2020) crimes. In the context of Indian society which is by and large patriarchal in nature, females are either completely or partially dependent on their male partners for their well-being. This dependency does not make them independent or self-sufficient. Hence, they are easily exploited and sexually assaulted by their male counterparts. Their dependence on males confines their growth, ability and public interaction thus limiting their potential. It also restrains their choices, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence (Sexual Abuse and Domestic Violence During Lockdown, 2020).

This happened in two gang rape cases involving a 21-year-old woman and a 16-year-old girl. The same factors were involved in cases of domestic violence that occurred during lockdown. In majority of cases females were easy targets for males as the former were confined to their homes due to lockdown. This made things difficult for women who could not move to other safe places or seek any support system for their benefit when they faced violence from the men. These circumstances resulting from the pandemic coupled with already existing hierarchical and patriarchal norms aggravated the situation of already vulnerable women in the society.

### *Boredom*

According to Drody et al. (2022), boredom that emanates from lack of engagement can result in

volatile behavior. Due to boredom males become more aggressive and lose their sanity. Oftentimes, they lose their ability to judge between the good and the bad. Hence, to get rid of their boredom, often males get involved in activities which are against decent societal norms. These can happen due to two factors: biological and cultural. The biological factor explains males' involvement in sexual violence activity and cultural factors explains males' involvement in domestic violence.

India is a patriarchal society and here boys (male child) are raised in male dominating families, where males exhibit their masculinity through aggression. A lot of traditional family set up promotes this kind of toxic male masculinity. Hence boys tend to grow up with a certain mindset and often resort to violence. They also tend to acquire a habit of getting involved in GBV (Straus, 1980). The patriarchal society firms up the belief that it is only a man who can be the decision-maker of the family, and that he has all the right over his wife and can resort to any kind of violence to control her or teach her a lesson if she refuses to obey him (Malamuth, 1981).

In all the 31 cases the perpetrators of the crime came from villages. They were below a certain economic and cultural threshold. Most of them worked as labourers. Some of them were college students who had no stimulating or constructive arrangement during lockdown period. Hence, they committed such acts to kill their boredom and to gain a sense of something adventurous. This can be observed in all the 31 cases where the perpetrators are all craving for an adrenaline rush.

## MIGRATION

Migration is another major factor behind GBV. The migrant community was severely hurt during COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of industries were shut down rendering them unemployed within a short span of time. An overnight decision by the government declaring lockdown in the entire country hit this community even harder. People who worked as migrants not only lost their jobs during pandemic, but the lockdown period also rendered them homeless, forcing them to travel back home with all their lock, stock, and barrel. Most of them took a perilous journey crossing through many states and districts to reach their native villages. Some made it, but a lot of them didn't. Some migrants perished midway from sheer exhaustion. Some even dozed off and died from accidents.

In this regard Pazzani (2007) stated in her research that migration creates social disorganization, thus increasing crime activities in a group. The pandemic forced around 50,000-60,000 people to move from their workplaces to their hometowns. The lockdown prompted chaotic and painful situation in India and migrants were heavily struggling with the problem of unemployment (Lockdown in India has impacted 40 million internal migrants, 2020). Fig. 1 illustrate the number of migrants during lockdown.

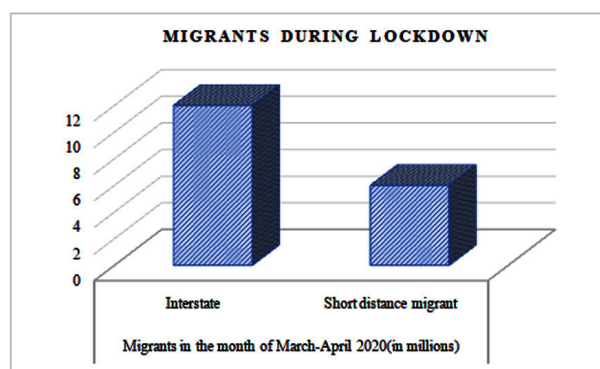


Fig. 2: Migrants during lockdown

The above figure shows that approximately 22 million people migrated from one place to another out of which 16 million were internal migrants and 6 million were short duration migrants. Most internal migrants who were hit the most during lockdown came from rural sector. Lack of jobs in villages and more money emanating from significant work opportunities in factories, industries, real estate business, construction sector in big cities force migration upon them.

The reports mentioned in this study show that rape against migrant women traveling from one place to the other was higher during the lockdown. Even the perpetrators of the crime belonged to the migrant category. This can be seen in all the above mentioned cases. A 40-year-old woman, another 16-year-old girl, a 21-year-old female who were raped were all migrants who were probably traveling back to their hometown during lockdown period. The crimes happened when either victim or perpetrator were migrating from one place to other (Chishti, 2020). For example, a 16-year-old girl stuck in the outer part of the city who took help from her friend (gangraped by group of friends) was raped while she was making her way to her hometown from the city where she was studying as a college student. The pattern is quite similar in other incidents of rape as well. Migration can make women vulnerable and vulnerable women are more susceptible to gender violence.

## Unemployment

Lockdown was declared to control the spread of coronavirus within the country. In other words, COVID-19 pandemic brought about lockdown and lockdown brought about unemployment. In patriarchal systems prevalent in most parts of India, male members are the bread owners and earning members of the family. But the lockdown situation forced by the global pandemic rendered a lot of these males unemployed forcing upon them a sense of insecurity and causing them much anxiety as well as stress. The uncertainty of the situation and what the future had in store for them further aggravated stress level within the males. The pressure that patriarchal societies put on these men to prove their mettle by earning well and shouldering all the financial responsibility, further aggravated stress levels causing disruption within the family. A toxic unemployed men would often engage in violent behaviour towards women to vent out their frustration and anger. A news report published in the newspaper 'The Hindu' reported that some 12.2 crore Indians had lost their jobs during the lockdown period in April. This led to men perpetrating different forms of GBV against women. Hence, unemployment can play a critical role in generating violent behaviour towards women.

## DISCUSSION

Violence against women continue to be one of the foremost problems of Indian society. Our society has been grappling with women centric issues for a very long time. Violence against women continues to be a grave issue within our male dominated family structures prevalent in most parts of the country.

The lockdown period caused complete disruption of life and aggravated the situation of women making them even more prone to violence. Hence, it should not come as a surprise to see GBV cases rise during the time of the pandemic.

These were trying times for those people struggling with bare minimum needs important for survival. Hundreds and thousands of people became unemployed and were rendered unemployed. Hundreds were forced to go to bed without food. Migrants crossed difficult terrains, taking perilous journey by foot in scorching heat to reach their hometowns. This included thousands of women who were travelling distances sometimes alone, sometimes with their families and sometimes

with other migrants. Often, the women had to make the journey through deserted areas. In all the GBV (sexual assault) cases against the women the perpetrators were mindful that the women were exhausted from traveling. Hence, they would not be in a position to defend themselves because of physical exhaustion. Choosing an isolated place for such crimes would further increase their vulnerability as the victims cannot cry out for help and the perpetrators can get away after carrying out the act. When the crime took place, the victim was alone except in one case where the victim was with her brother. The victims belonged to families who were came from Below Poverty Line (BPL) or they were from middle class background. Their educational skill and occupational status were low. Yodanis (2004) found in her study that less educational skill and lower occupational status of women and girls make them an easy target for sexual assault. Those women who have less education cannot seek upward mobility in terms of financial growth. When it comes to occupation, they are confined to menial jobs which does not provide them with significant economic or social security. Instead, it makes them more vulnerable, and exposes them to toxic masculinity from men.

Men attempt to sexually assault the opposite sex to establish their control over them. In this regard Zillman and Bryant (1982) have stated in their studies that males usually commit gender based crimes especially rape to exhibit their dominance over the opposite sex. Most men generally believe that women are only an element of pleasure and are subordinate to them. This is quite evident in the two incidents in which a 21-year-old girl and a 16-year-old girl were gangraped by a group of people. In both incidents we see that the female migrants had requested the males for help during travelling to their native places. In other words, the women exhibited a sense of dependency on the males while travelling. This gave the feeling of supremacy to their male partners and encouraged them to perpetrate the crime. During lockdown male members of family spent more time at home. They, too, felt confined. Inability to step outside their family fold and travel freely often forced these males to take out their anger and frustration on the females' members of family.

During the lockdown period, maximum GBV cases were reported from states known to be traditionally and severely patriarchal, such as Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi (NCRB, 2020).

In families which are dominantly male centric,

role of females happens to be secondary. A girl child growing up in such families are trained to be mellow and obedient. They are discouraged from being independent and self sufficient, whereas the boys are trained to be aggressive, in their daily lives (Indian women: Yesterday, today and tomorrow, 2015). Even television and cinema depict the stereotypical image of men and women (Cuklanz, 2000). This too encourages GBV in Indian societies as women are always shown as victims and men are always being portrayed a powerful, strong and dominant.

## CONCLUSION

Every perpetrator has a different motivation for committing crime (Pazzani, 2007). A plethora of studies point at multiple factors that encourage men to perpetrate gender related crimes such as rape, sexual assault, molestation against women, domestic violence, etc. Men commit gender crimes against women for different reasons. And men in India have several reasons to sexually assault women. Sexual violence against women cannot be prevented by controlling just one factor. There are several factors involved. From cultural exposure to family upbringing to mindset issues, there are various reasons why violence can be perpetrated against women.

Findings of the study indicate that GBV during lockdown period emanated due to various reasons. Several attacks happened at night when the victim was alone. The time of the day in this case also matters a lot because at night places can be more deserted and visibility could be significantly low. Hence criminals can think that they can get away after committing the crime. The time of the day as well as location can act as deciding factors for perpetrators to commit crime. This is clearly evident from the abovementioned cases where incidents against the victims took place in locations which were isolated.

It is important to note that the lockdown period, in terms of space and time, provided much scope for the perpetrator to commit gender based crimes. Several studies and research carried out earlier in this direction have also shown that male always love to dominate females and they get pleasure in sexually violating females as long as they can get away with such acts. Boredom is another major factor which reinforces criminal attitude in males who attack females who are soft targets for them.

Those males who dominate, control, and sexually

violate females & perceive women as objects of pleasure, are brought up in a harshly patriarchal culture and setup. Lockdown brought about unemployment and migration which made a very supportive environment for committing these kinds of crimes when females were not able to change their plight and were unable to communicate with anyone or request anybody for help. Patriarchal structure of society, different upbringings of male and female, exposure to media, less education, depression, social learning, social disorganization theory (moment when migrants traveled from one state to other), insecurity of future, frustration, are some major factors that perpetrated sexual violence against women during COVID-19.

Another set of social thinkers also state boredom, monotonicity of daily life as compelling factors for men to commit gender based violence against females. As pointed earlier, some men can also do it to seek adrenaline rush or to simply indulge in the pleasure of adventure.

The research has seriously tried to analyze the reasons and investigate factors that can compel men to commit serious crimes against women. The relevance of such a study becomes all the more important in this day and age when feministic movements are shaping the way we think about men women relationship in our society. The role that men and women play in society are being seriously questioned. New adjustments are being made within this hierarchical order. More women are calling out sexual offenders. Stories on violence against women are now becoming mainstream stories. Media is now heavily invested in women centric stories. Gender stereotypes are being shattered. Movies around women and gender issues are loved by audience. In other words, feminism is now taking centerstage.

Hence, any kind of research carried out in this direction becomes a significant attempt in understanding issues that can take us one step forward towards achieving an egalitarian society such as a small step of "Me too" movement has given space to females all around the world including India to openly talk about rape and sexual assault. The revelations have also showed how all pervasive this problem is within our society as women from every walk of life have come forward to share their stories. It is hence important to call attention to this GBV carry out elaborate work in this field. The GBV is growing in India and around the world. On that front work in this field is of paramount importance.

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